Jim Carroll

Video terminals make poor drinking buddies

Immediately following the horrific events of September 11, we heard a lot of talk about how the world of work would be forever changed.

Pundits immediately declared that there would be a far greater degree of reliance upon videoconferencing, e-mail and other forms of communication. Wholesale travel bans quickly emerged, as companies and staff tried to get a handle on the complexity of the situation. Many conferences and meetings were cancelled, and some suggested that in the future, most people would "attend" corporate events and conferences via videoconferencing.

There was such a sudden focus on this new wired world of work that we quickly saw a sudden spike in the stock of videoconferencing and other communication-based technology companies.

And to this day, many still hold a belief that after September 11, we are about to see a lot less human contact in the world of work.

To that, I say, what rubbish!

I remember well my first business trip after September 11 — I was actually in Ottawa. I was looking out the window of my taxi at the office building of one HiTech company that I had heard had imposed a travel ban. And I could imagine the sales people in that office right then. Heck, they had to be climbing the walls, tapping their fingers impatiently, ready to scream out, "yah, but we gotta get out and see the friggin' customers!"

A sales force trapped inside with technology tools is going to be a pretty lousy sales force. They have to be out, doing what they do best — working on their human relationships in order to close a deal.

The fact is, people are people, and they want to be near people. The process of closing a sale is one that is often based upon discussion, presentation, and a careful thrust-and-parry between sales executive and customer. In many situations, the sale occurs over a period of days or weeks, and in the case of big-ticket items, often months or years. And it involves much refreshment and food. Many a deal has been closed only because the seller and buyer have bonded over a few beers.

That's a fact that won't disappear because of September 11. Granted, things have become more complicated, but it doesn't mean that the very nature of the human condition changes.

Sure, technology has come to play a big role in supporting the sales process, and it will continue to do so. We're arming the sales force of the future with powerful CRM tools that provide deep insight into the customer, in order to enhance their potential of a sale. We've outfitted them with a variety of technologies that will allow the sales executive on the road to constantly be in touch, and instantly grab the critical information they need. We're putting in place intelligence systems that will help to guide where our sales people should be focusing their efforts.

But we're still going to have to send them out on the road, and on occasion, they're still going to have to get half-drunk in order to close the deal with certain customers, and go jogging for a few miles with some others.

And oh yes, many a business deal with be finalized on the golf course, as North Americans continue to plow billions of dollars into the business links.

To suggest otherwise is, to me at least, ludicrous.

Consider this fact: North Americans spend at least $1 billion a day eating out. A good chunk of that represents customer meetings and get-togethers. It is interesting that one of the key provisions in the U.S. tax code changes currently being passed in an effort to get the economy moving again, is to restore full deductibility of the business lunch. (It was only 48% before.) At least the politicians realize what makes the world go round!

Then there is the meeting and conference industry. (Conflict alert: I earn my living on the speaker circuit, so I might be biased, but I don't think so.) To think that we are suddenly going to abandon incentive trips, sales meetings, association get-togethers, corporate off-sites and all kinds of other events, and move instead to small, stale, airless meeting rooms where we will watch a speaker via a video screen is just as preposterous.

What drives many events aren't simply the meetings, the agenda and the speakers. It is often a need to bring together a team of people, whether they are the sales force, management, executives, or the professionals within an industry. It's the after-four get-togethers, cocktail hours and hospitality suites that are equally important to these events. It's the bonding, the whispering about corporate politics, and the after-hour storytelling and boasting that makes these events so successful — and so important. No matter what anyone says, a company can't build a cohesive corporate team spirit through a bunch of video monitors.

Yes, we will probably see growth in video events and conferencing. There will be some fall-off in get-togethers and meetings. Technology will come to play an even bigger role in the way we communicate and interact in the business world.

But at the end of the day, people are people, and they're going to continue to want to get together. ◂◂

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